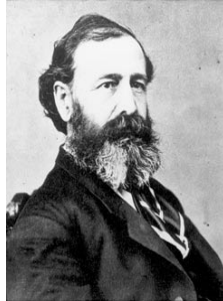


# Senate Statistics

## Sergeants at Arms

### John R. French (1869-1879)



U.S. Senate Historical Office

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When former Senate Sergeant at Arms John French died in 1890, a friend summed up his life this way. "He lived in the most wonderful period of his country's history, and he aided greatly in shaping her destiny. Born when the lash swung over the bared back of the slave, he lived to see the slave set free; to represent a former slave state in Congress and to see the wave of population roll from Plymouth Rock to the Golden Gate."

John R. French was born on May 28, 1819, in the central New Hampshire town of Gilmanton. He attended school there and, at the age of fourteen, began an apprenticeship with a printer in Concord, the state capital. When French turned eighteen, he went to work for *The Herald of Freedom*, the first antislavery newspaper in New England. *The Herald's* publisher was a forthright abolitionist named Nathaniel Rogers. Rogers once published an observation that made him very unpopular with certain of the local residents. In response to the argument that he should not attack slavery because it was justified in the Bible, Rogers declared that on such matters the Bible must be ignored. This statement provoked an angry mob to attack the *Herald's* office. When John French heard the onrushing crowd, he grabbed the paper's subscription list and account books and carried them to safety. Had the attackers found the subscription list, they would likely have made life very difficult for those neighbors whose names appeared on its pages. When Nathaniel Rogers died in 1846, the *Herald* ceased publication. French, who had married Rogers' daughter, took up publishing duties for another Concord newspaper, the *New Hampshire Statesman*. These formative years exposed the young publisher to the injustices of slavery and fired his determination to work for its abolition.

In 1854, French moved with his wife and three children from New Hampshire to northeastern Ohio. He settled in Painesville, near Cleveland, to edit the *Painesville Telegraph*. During the 1856 presidential campaign, he moved to the *Cleveland Morning Leader*, through which he vigorously supported the candidacy of [John C. Fremont](#), the newly established Republican party's first presidential nominee. With many other migrating New Englanders, French found the this region of Ohio—known as the Western Reserve—filled with new opportunities for settlement and antislavery activity. His

involvement in local political activities led to his election to the Ohio house of representatives, where he served as a Republican in 1858 and 1859. In those years he formed lasting friendships with major antislavery political figures including [Salmon P. Chase](#), a former U.S. senator and New Hampshire native whose campaign for the Ohio governorship owed much of its success to French's tireless efforts.

When President [Abraham Lincoln](#) appointed Salmon Chase as his treasury secretary in 1861, Chase summoned French to Washington to take a job in his department. Late in 1864, Chase became chief justice of the United States. In those crucial concluding months of the Civil War, as Union forces began to take control of regions within the Confederate states, President Lincoln—on Chase's recommendation—appointed French as a collector of federal taxes in North Carolina. At the end of the war in 1865, French moved his family to Edenton, North Carolina.

Within a year, a bitter struggle developed between President [Andrew Johnson](#) and Congress over the best way to readmit North Carolina and the other former Confederate states to the Union. (That struggle would soon lead to Johnson's impeachment in the House of Representatives and a Senate trial presided over by Chief Justice Chase.) During 1867 and 1868, Congress enacted over the president's vetoes a series of Reconstruction acts placing each state under a military commander and setting strict readmission procedures. Once a state satisfied those requirements and ratified the Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment—providing citizenship to all persons born in the United States, including former slaves—it would be eligible for readmission to the Union.

Anticipating readmission, North Carolina formed a constitutional convention in January 1868. Local residents, including many former Confederate soldiers, resented the participation of outsiders in this convention. These so-called "carpetbaggers" were northerners who had moved to the South after the war, often carrying their belongings in suitcases made of carpet material. As one historian has written of these new residents, "Some wanted to help North Carolina while others were more interested in helping themselves." Prominent among these unwelcome northerners was tax-collector John French.

Following the adoption of its new constitution, North Carolina held special elections to fill its seven U.S. House seats for the remaining months of the Congress then in session. The winners included four native residents and three "carpetbaggers." French easily won a seat to represent the First District, which covered the state's coastal and eastern interior regions. His campaign had its moments of danger, however, as angry citizens disrupted rallies and frightened likely voters. On one occasion, a heckler savagely beat French with a heavy object before being wrestled to the ground and jailed. These experiences may have convinced French not to stand for election to a full term in the Congress that would begin in March 1869.

On July 6, 1868, two days after North Carolina and five other former Confederate states won readmission to the Union, French became one of the first Tarheel representatives to

take his oath in the House. Instead of new-member celebrations and conversations about pending legislation, he found his colleagues tired and dispirited in the wake of President Andrew Johnson's recently concluded Senate impeachment trial. Within days, the House adjourned for the summer and the fall election campaigns. When the Fortieth Congress reconvened in December 1868 for its final three-month session, French launched his search for another job. Within three weeks, he had found one. On March 22, 1869, the Senate elected French as its ninth sergeant at arms.

French's ten years as sergeant at arms spanned the post-Civil War Reconstruction era—a time of great turbulence for the Senate and the nation. During this period, the Senate witnessed the arrival of the first African American senator (1870); creation of the Committee on Privileges and Elections to help resolve the many Reconstruction-inspired Senate election disputes (1871); denial of committee assignments to Liberal Republicans who differed with their party's mainstream leadership (1871-1872); investigation of financial misconduct involving the vice president and members of Congress (1872-1873); an impeachment trial for a secretary of war (1876); and the political deal that resolved the deadlocked 1876 presidential election and effectively ended the Reconstruction era. The large number of Senate investigations during this period placed great demands on Sergeant at Arms French to serve subpoenas, including one to his second cousin, Benjamin Brown French, a former clerk of the House of Representatives and commissioner of public buildings. He also arranged the funerals of several senators who died in office.

French deserves great credit for getting the Senate to recognize the importance of the Office of Sergeant at Arms. One very specific measure of that importance in those days was the salary paid to the Senate's two principal officers. In the years prior to French's arrival, the sergeant at arms received approximately half of what the secretary of the Senate was paid. By the end of his first two years on the job, however, the Senate raised his salary to equal that of the secretary.

When the Democrats took control of the Senate in March 1879, French's tenure as sergeant at arms came to an end. He accepted an appointment as secretary to a special commission to investigate and settle problems with the Ute Indians in Colorado. The problems related to an 1879 uprising by residents of a Ute reservation who resented a federal Indian agent's misguided efforts to turn their settlement into a Christian farming commune. The Ute Commission, in 1880, forced the sale of the tribe's Colorado reservation to the federal government and arranged the relocation of its residents. When the commission concluded its work, French moved first to Nebraska and then to the Idaho territory, where he edited the *Boise Statesman* and then the *Daily Sun*. He also assisted in that territory's preparations for statehood, which was granted in July 1890. In late September, exhausted from his efforts to help elect Republican Willis Sweet as Idaho's first member of the U.S. House of Representatives, he became ill. His condition worsened and on October 2, 1890, following a full day on the job, the seventy-one-year-old French died.